



**LIVE & LEARN**  
Environmental Education



**The Global Initiative**  
*for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*

**Alternative Report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of  
Discrimination against Women**

**Maldives, 60<sup>th</sup> Session (16 February 2015 - 06 March 2015)**

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**Submitted by:**

**Live & Learn Environmental Education (Maldives)**

*and*

**Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR)**



This project was supported by a grant from Australian aid. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of Live & Learn Environmental Education (Maldives) and the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The information provided

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**Live & Learn Environmental Education (Maldives)** vision is for a sustainable and equitable world free from poverty. Live & Learn educates, mobilises communities, and facilitates supportive partnerships in order to foster a greater understanding of sustainability, and to help move towards a sustainable future. Live & Learn aims to:

- encourage individual and community attitudes, values and actions that are ethical and sustainable
- encourage networks and partnerships between schools, children, youth, teachers, governments, chiefs, elders, parents, the media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
- share knowledge, skills, learning experiences and resources with others for the benefit of the physical and human environment
- promote the integration of the concepts of human rights, environmentalism, humanitarianism, culture, gender equality and peace in all projects and programs
- promote action-based, effective and creative learning models and teaching methodologies.

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**Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR)** is an international non-governmental human rights organization which seeks to advance the realization of economic, social and cultural rights throughout the world, tackling the endemic problem of global poverty through a human rights lens. The vision of the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is of a world where economic, social and cultural rights are fully respected, protected and fulfilled and on equal footing with civil and political rights, so that all people are able to live in dignity.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Introduction: Advancement of women in the Maldives. . . . .	3
2.	Article 7: The changing mandates of the women’s development committees with the onset of decentralization. . . . .	4
3.	Articles 3, 7 and 14: Women’s development committees and non-governmental organizations role in natural resource governance. . . . .	6
4.	Women’s development committees and non-governmental organizations role in natural disaster management situations. . . . .	7
5.	Article 4: Recommendations for positive actions to accelerate women’s participation in natural resource governance and disaster management . . . . .	10
	References . . . . .	10

## Women's role in environmental governance and in disaster management

The history of the Maldives reveals remarkable achievements of women in contributing to the national development. This included their role in social, economic, environmental and political matters. Empowerment of women is important as it will benefit the society as whole. In this report a focus is given on the women's role including environmental and disaster management situations, in relation to different articles of CEDAW.

### 1. Introduction: Advancement of women in the Maldives

One of the most important elements for advancement of women is the opportunity for education. In the Maldives, there is no gender discrimination in enrolment of children to schools. As most, islands have schools in which students can study up to secondary school level, and the number of students who have to leave home and migrate to the capital Malé has decreased over the years. In 1992, 53 percent of students in the secondary grades in the capital Malé were boys. It is likely that the higher percentage of boys was due to the higher number of boys that migrated. However by 2012, the percentage of boys in the secondary grades in Malé decreased to 49.3 percent. This indicates an equitable percentage has been reached in terms of gender. Among those who were in secondary schools in the country, the female students in the islands outside Malé comprised only 19.1 percent in 1992 compared to 34.6 percent in 2012 (based on data from Department of Planning, 2013).

As secondary education became available in most islands, it was an opportunity for more girls to study without the need to migrate. Secondary education has been important as it can lead the girls to higher education. However, one obstacle is that in most islands subjects related to science were not taught in schools, and therefore it would not have been easy for girls to study such subjects without the need to migrate. Studies in science subjects have been regarded necessary for enrollment in the university in areas such as environmental management and nursing.

In terms of university education, the Maldives National University was formed recently. On environmental education, a degree programme was started with funding from the World Bank in 2010. This was important as most of the environmental professionals in the country have been men. For this programme the World Bank provided support in training teachers. An emphasis was given to include female teachers. Successfully the first batch of students completed the course. Among 13 students that graduated in the first batch, 10 of them were female students. These graduates have the opportunity to serve as there is an increasing need for environmental research and environmental project managers.

Maldivian women have engaged in a number of different important posts in positions in the civil services. In 2012, 51.28 percent of the civil servants were women, and women also comprised of 55.83 percent of civil servants whose monthly salary were higher than 5000 Rufiyaa (Department of Planning, 2013)

Although the opportunity is available for women to participate, political participation of the women is relatively limited in the parliament. Out of 85 seats, women hold

only 5 seats at present. If more women are in the parliament there is a possibility that more issues will be discussed in the parliament related to women's empowerment.

The current political participation level of women and the lack of opportunities available for women in the political arena suggest that more effort is needed to increase women's participation in politics in order to promote women's issues and enact favorable laws which are conducive for women's empowerment especially in the governance of natural resources at the community level.

Maldives rank overall 105<sup>th</sup> out of the 142 countries in the Gender Gap Index, with the score of 0.656 (Global Gender Gap Report 2014), reflecting a considerable gap in women's opportunities in actively taking part in nation development. The gender index is based on economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. Figure 1 shows the performance of the Maldives for different criteria between 2006 and 2014.

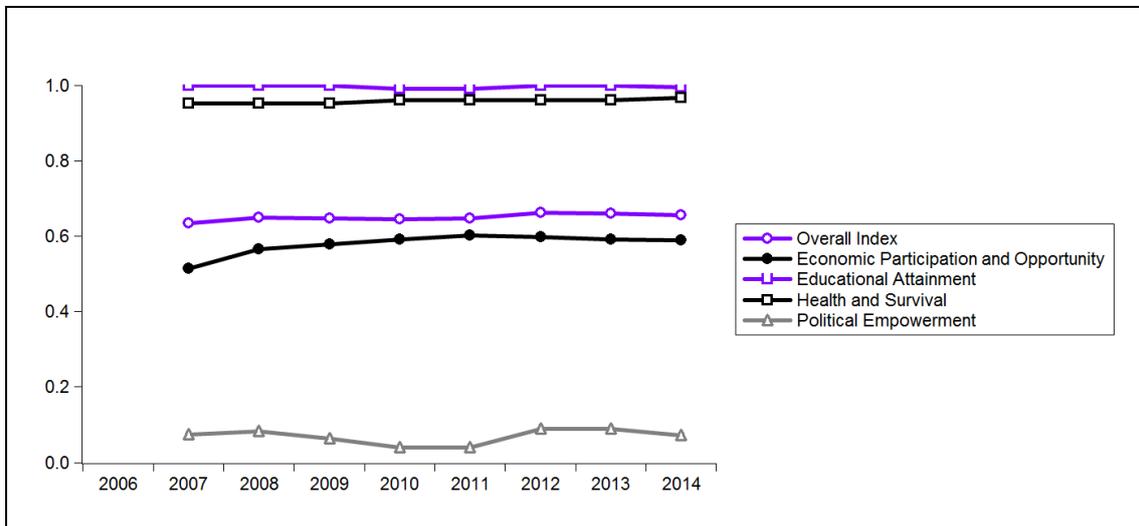


Figure 1. Gender Gap Index Trend: 2006 – 2014 (Adapted from Gender Gap Index, 2014)

As Figure 1 shows, between 2007 and 2014, the Index did not have a significant decrease in any of the criteria except for political empowerment. However, it shows that there has not been significant improvement on economic participation and opportunities.

## 2. Article 7: The changing mandates of the women's development committees with the onset of decentralization

*Article 7 provides that States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life*

Island Women's Development Committees (IWDCs) were formed with the objective of addressing women's issues and to act as vehicles through which women are empowered, especially by providing a window to access income generating opportunities and advocate for their rights to equal opportunity. As such, women's

committees have tried to do projects for the betterment of the community while also mainstreaming environmental sustainability. For example, Ukulhas community is planning to start up hydroponics as an income generating and climate change adaptation activity.

Women's development committees have been in existence in all the communities and have been raising their voices on women's issues and undertaking developmental work for the benefit of the community at large since its formulation in 1981 by the Government of Maldives. However, these bodies did not have legal standing. In 2008 all the allowances, which was previously provided to the IWDC, were stopped and the future and functionality of IWDC was in question. (MOHF, 2010).

The Decentralization Act 2010 was passed by the parliament in April 2010. Although the Act accords legal status to IWDCs, it has provisions that have implications for functioning of IWDCs. Specifically, the following provisions are in need of amendment as identified in an evaluation report (MOHF, 2010):

**Clauses A, B and D of Article 35 of the Decentralization Act, 2010** need to be reviewed and amended:

- **Clause A of Article 35** states that IWDC's should be under the Island Council. However, it is important that IWDCs maintain their autonomy and work in collaboration with Island Council.
- **Clause B of Article 35** states that IWDCs should be women-only committees and should be elected by only women of the community. However, there is need for IWDCs to be elected by all members of the community. In addition, the membership of IWDCs should be open to both men and women. .
- **Clause D of Article 35** states that the 'local government authority' will develop IWDC regulations. The IWDC regulations should be developed by the Department of Gender in consultation with IWDCs.

**Article 36 of the Decentralization Act** also needs to be reviewed in light of the fact that IWDC activities have covered a wide range of initiatives: health, education, income generation, etc.

In addition, with more liberalized governance structures in place women have the opportunity to become bolder in raising their voices and in terms of affiliating themselves to a political party. However, what has been observed is that often party agendas become more important to the parliament members than the concerns of the people who elected them.

Prior to votes in Parliament, parties generate three line whips. An example is the case put against the female cabinet minister Dr. Aishath Shakeela who served as Minister of Environment initially and then Minister of Gender, and Minister of Health. She was removed from the cabinet after a majority vote against her in the Parliament. Members of Parliament who go against the three line whips of the

parties, are often removed from the party, or voluntarily leave the party due to immense criticism by other members of their own respective parties.

On the other hand, floor crossing is an issue in the Maldives as members switch the parties after being elected. This means the members do change their positions on issues after moving to parties based on party agendas. In such cases the opinions of those who voted for a member do not become important. Thus, even if pledges have been made previously on empowering women, it will not be discussed unless it is a priority of the party.

At the grassroots level, people who need change thus become vulnerable as they cannot rely on the elected MPs. This increases the need for development of capacity to be self-reliant. With the decentralization came the election of the leaders. However, even at the community level women do not stand for office except very few women in some of the communities. This is reflected in the number of elected women in the islands and atolls councils, and the number of elected women's development committees. For example in Kaashidhoo Island there are 4 councilors among whom there is 1 female councilor. A challenge however whether the councilors will promote, ideologies of the political parties they are affiliated to, or on development objectives.

It is possible that the dominance of the political ideologies cause silence of female councilors in voicing concerns on major development projects of the community. One of the projects the new Government pledged was to establish an airport in Kulhudhuffushi Island which has a wetland. The women of the island have relied on the wetland for centuries for livelihood activities such as coir rope making. The decision to build or not is not finalized yet as environmental impact assessment (EIA) studies will be prepared. It will be good if the EIA study will take into consideration the views of women, and NGOs.

### **3. Articles 3, 7 and 14: Women's development committees and non-governmental organizations role in natural resource governance**

Non-governmental organizations, especially national and community based non-governmental organizations focusing on women's issues, are limited in the Maldives. There are however the aforementioned women's development committees and some organized groups registered as nongovernment organizations and sports clubs at the community level.

The Maldivian Government has been expanding opportunities for women in establishing small and medium enterprises/ cooperatives related to the utilization and governance of natural resources in agriculture, and other sectors to accelerate women's empowerment and economic growth during the last decade. However, these efforts have not been pursued by women due to the many challenges faced by women's groups. The functioning of the corporative was hindered mainly due lack of financial management capabilities among the women's groups.

In almost all the atolls most of the economic activities related to utilizing the natural resources are concentrated on main traditional sectors such as fishing, tourism,

agriculture. Manufacturing is lagging behind and making a slow progress (UNDP, 2010). Traditionally women were involved in fish processing and making materials used for traditional housing such as rope and thatch weaving. In a survey conducted in 4 islands in the northern region on home based workers, 80 percent of respondents were women, 20 percent of respondents were men (Shumais, 2014). This reflects the situation in homes, as most home-based workers are women. In many islands men go out for fishing or work outside the island in resorts or in Male.

Women play an important part in collection of coconut and clearing of bushy land to collect firewood. Women also play an integral role in coconut processing activities, including de-husking, grating, drying, milling for oil manufacturing coir rope, fibrous husks etc. Hence, women play an indispensable role in farming and in managing the households. However, their contributions often remain hidden due to some social barriers and gender bias. There need to be conducive policies in place to recognize the contribution of women in the agricultural sector and the management of natural resources at the community level.

Currently women dominate the informal sector with almost 90 percent working as self-employed as home-based worker. Although their wages are limited, it cannot be said their contribution is small, because it complements family income, and it gives emotional wellbeing for the workers. It also gives sense of inspiration for their children. However, some of the work women do has risks, and these include risks due to their own practices. For example, farmers' use of excessive pesticides can have harm to their health. Therefore creation of awareness is needed.

As Maldives is a country that is dependent on most of its products, it is expected that the importance of farming will continue to increase. More than 54 percent of the registered farmers are women (according to the statistics from Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture). These farmers usually do not own the land on which they farm. They are allowed to farm, but if a need arises the plots can be taken by the council. In a way this was not a problem to some farmers, because what they do is to move to new plot of land, after some time of use. They do this because the land gets degraded, due to use of pesticides (Shareef, 2015). However, if the farmers use conservation methods and do multi cropping the land could stay at a better quality.

After the Decentralization Act became effective in 2010, the jurisdiction of land use patterns is with the island and atoll councils. For agriculture, the farming plots are either leased or rented and in some communities allocated to the farmers by the councils. In some communities the land is given out for a limited time period. Since the women do not own the land or property they lack the capability to show that they have collateral when it comes to borrowing. There is a need to specifically look into these issues and match with the opportunities to empower women in natural resource governance issues (Shafia, 2012).

#### **4. Women's development committees and non-governmental organizations role in natural disaster management situations**

Women are especially hard-hit by the social impacts of natural disasters. This section will highlight the existing inequalities and the vulnerabilities faced during the 2004

tsunami in the Maldives and how women responded to the situations created by the aftermaths of the tsunami. Women were particularly vulnerable because they have fewer resources in their own right and under their own control. They have no permanent place in decision-making systems and they suffer traditional, routine and gratuitous gender-biased oppression. By virtue of their lower economic, social, and political status, women tend to be more vulnerable to disasters.

In post-tsunami recovery programmes most of the assistance was given to those formally registered in the case of houses or businesses. Most of the women were doing informal work in the islands, and thus many such families would have been disadvantaged. Similarly, those families who were living in houses registered in other people's names were also disadvantaged although they may have lost their belongings.

Thus, it is important to establish set of criteria in a participatory way by listening to women's concerns in designing development programmes for women. Many of the women also had to change their livelihood activities, and therefore mechanisms were needed to support them as part of tsunami recovery programmes.

After the 2004 tsunami, the salinization of the ground water led the women to search for supplemental income generating activities, and it left women to fend for them and assume even greater responsibility for caring for their family. The soil of the island which was conducive to growing a variety of crops including cucumber, eggplant, chili, taro, pumpkin, ash gourd, cabbage, sweet potato, snake gourd, banana and watermelon.

Maldivian women have been the backbone of the island subsistence economy. Their respective role in family, which is of productive nature to a large extent, makes the family and society sustainable but it is not acknowledged by and large. Women's work in agriculture and home-based small businesses is often seen as an extension of their domestic responsibilities, rather than a separate economic activity.

Certain islands have been categorized as being more vulnerable to natural hazards in the Maldives and these island communities depend more on the natural resource base for all aspects of life. Securing food, water and fuel are key community concerns, which are predominantly taken care of by women.

Women are still largely excluded from formal planning and decision-making and need to be empowered to do so effectively. This is essential to ensure effective disaster reduction policies. If some decision-making were shifted to involve women at the planning stages then more fruitful outcomes would be reaped. Creating safe harbours is recognized by the Maldives commitments in the report on National Strategy for Sustainable Development (Department of Planning, 2009). These projects impact women whether it is on environmental impact or social impact. Following is an excerpt from a compilation of British Red Cross in the Maldives.

*“Some women depended on coir rope making to supplement their incomes; however after the tsunami coir rope weaving has stopped because the coir pits located by the beach were washed away in tsunami.*

*About 50 households had sewing machines and all of them were lost in the tsunami. Not everybody who had a machine was involved in tailoring. After the tsunami only 4 to 5 households bought sewing machines. Several women used to go to the beaches and reefs in groups to collect shells and sell them to intermediaries. After the tsunami this too has stopped because of the fear of another tsunami". (British Red Cross, 2006)*

The above excerpt indicates the importance of identifying women's concerns and needs as they can be significantly different from men. Unless women are included in public consultations, specific concerns of the women may not be known. As was observed in the trip to Kunburudhoo in the low tide, pregnant women, children and the elderly would find difficult to get to the island from the boat, as there are no stairs on the harbour. Such issue on the design was not mentioned in the EIA reports and thus is a weakness (Shumais, 2013).

In the case of Kunburudhoo, during the EIA public consultation stage, the women were able to give some recommendations, which is strength in the EIA process. As per the suggestion of the community, entrance channel was reoriented considering the southwest monsoon winds and also a quay wall was added to have further coastal protection and to reduce the risk from sea swells.

However most EIA reports in the Maldives indicate limited or no consultation with women, and the elderly even in the beginning phases, which is a weakness in the EIA process. For example in the construction of harbor in Kunburudhoo island, while no elderly was consulted in the EIA process, only one woman was consulted out 17 persons that were consulted and listed in the EIA report.

Although women may be given the opportunity to participate in consultation meetings as Niyaz and Storey (2011) indicate, women often do not voice their concerns. It is possible that women in some islands do not have confidence to raise voices because of an impression that communities do not consider women's opinions are important with regard to environmental resources. According to them such cultural factors are associated with political dynamics and women are only informed without giving an opportunity to involve.

A case study from Kalaidhoo island is offered to show the importance of identifying the needs of women as needs may differ. When the houses were designed after the tsunami for the victims, the kitchen was designed outside the houses, as was the practice in the olden days in the Maldives. However, the women of the community raised their concerns by stating that they were not safe to cross from the house to the kitchen when there was not enough lighting at night and since the houses were very near the forest area they did not feel safe. The designs were changed to accommodate the concerns raised by the women. These women groups proved that they could inform, motivate, and supervise the use of local safety features into the construction and design of the new houses and make use of appropriate technology and local resources.

Peter (2009) noted that Community involvement in post disaster re-construction is an important ingredient to the overall success of housing and infrastructure redevelopment in his case study on the tsunami recovery programme on the Maldives. He noted that women were given the opportunity to raise comments on the housing in focus group discussions, which was the largest component of the tsunami recovery, work in the Maldives.

### **5. Recommendations: Positive actions to accelerate women's participation in natural resource governance and disaster management**

In light of the above information, Live & Learn (Maldives) and GI-ESCR respectfully urge the CEDAW Committee to make the following recommendations to the State of Maldives:

- 1) Amend clauses A, B and D of Article 35, as well as Article 36, of the Decentralization Act, 2010, so as to ensure the independent and robust functioning of all Island Women's Development Committees (IWDCs).
- 2) Strengthen the capacities of women's groups and women's organizations, ensuring that they have appropriate legal status and supporting their participation in political and public life, particularly as it relates to natural resource management, as an essential part of building disaster-resilient communities and promoting gender equality. This should also include assisting these groups to utilize social media and information and communications technology.
- 3) Diversify opportunities for women and girl's education and provide specific opportunities for women to engage in environmental governance and in disaster management.
- 4) Create, implement and enforce conducive policies to recognize and support the contribution of women in the agriculture sector and support their active participation in the management of natural resources at the community level.
- 5) Ensure that all environmental impact assessment (EIA) take into account women's rights, need and experiences, and that affected women are effectively consulted in all EIAs.

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